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ABSTRACT

Training for the first three groups of volunteer court counselors of the Portsmouth (Va.) Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court during 1973 was accomplished in a series of four short meetings conducted by various professionals. In December 1973, the author received a Title I grant to conduct an intensive training workshop for volunteer counselors during the summer of 1974. The training program, consisting of eight three-hour meetings, used an experiential-didactic model in which participants worked in skill-building sessions focusing on listening-attending behaviors, empathic responding behaviors, questioning or probing behaviors, and initiative and problem-solving behaviors. In addition, participants were encouraged to practice their skills between sessions and to keep a diary of their experiences. These diaries served as a basis for discussions and for increasing participant self-awareness. Pre- and post-measures of communication skills showed significant participant improvement. A post-workshop subjective evaluation by participants was highly positive. (Author/PC)

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TRAINING VOLUNTEER COURT COUNSELORS

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Almost two years ago Winship Denton, the Volunteer Coordinator of the Portsmouth Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, asked me to conduct a short workshop on communications skills for a group of potential volunteer counselors. I conducted a three hour workshop, and since that time have conducted three other such workshops for incoming groups of volunteer counselors.

These workshops consisted of an overview of the major skills in interpersonal relationship and communication, and some brief role-playing experiences in attending, listening, empathic responding, and confrontive responding. The volunteers' reactions were consistently favorable, especially to experiential aspects of the brief workshops.

While we judged that these workshops were certainly better than no training in basic communication skills, both Mrs. Denton and I were aware that more extensive training would be very useful for the volunteers. So I started looking for some money to fund a workshop for extensive training. We were fortunate. With the help of the Old Dominion University Office of Research, I obtained a $6,699 grant from the Virginia State Agency of Title I of the Higher Education Act. The grant proposal called for a total of 24 hours of training for 25 potential volunteers and an evaluation of the training.

The recruitment phase of the workshop began in May 1974. In addition to the recruitment activities that Mrs. Denton usually undertook, we made joint appearances on five local television stations. These TV appearances, by the way, gave us an opportunity not only to recruit volunteer trainees but also explain the nature and value of the volunteer program and the value of skillful interpersonal communication. In addition to the television appearances, news acccounts of

the project appeared in all the local newspapers. As a result of these efforts, 44 potential volunteers contacted Mrs. Denton. From this number 28 were selected to participate in training. Twenty-two persons actually attended and completed the training.

Workshop trainees included three black males, five white males, five black females, and 10 white females. The age range was 22 to 65 with a median age of 35.5. With regards to formal education, five trainees had completed high school, 13 had some college work, three had completed college and one had done some graduate work. Occupations included a part-time minister-electrician, a retired civil service worker-now VISTA volunteer, students, an accountant, housewives, an active nurse and a retired nurse, a marine major, industrial workers, a student-waitress, and a mechanical engineer. It was an interesting and diverse group of persons who were open to learning and participated enthusiastically in training.

Training sessions were conducted twice a week from 7 to 10 p.m. during five weeks in June and July 1974. This was a demanding schedule for persons who were being paid nothing for their services. I consider good an attendance record of 85 percent for all participants for all possible meetings. All meetings were held in facilities of Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Portsmouth. The church donated these facilities.

Training activities were divided into two broad categories. The first category of activities consisted of 20 hours of systematic training in core interpersonal communication and problem-solving skills. The skills focused on primarily were attending behavior, listening, empathic responding, the communication of respect, honesty, and helpful confrontation. The training was built around nine graded, sequential exercises designed to have trainees gradually acquire skills through directed roleplaying. The form and content of the exercises are based on the suggestions of Carkhuff (1969, 1971).

Before the small group exercises there was discussion of the skill to be practiced and a demonstration of the skill. Following the small group exercises, there was further discussion and questions. Discussion and training was lead by me and William Brockman, a counselor at Bayberry Psychiatric Hospital in Hampton, Virginia. For each exercise, one or both of us introduced the skill to be practiced, discussed the rationale

for the skill and provided a model demonstration of the skill. Trainees were then divided into groups of three for practice. The trainees circulated among the groups to keep trainees on the task and operating properly.

During the exercises, trainees were guided in repeated and cumulative practice of major aspects of facilitative communication. Attending behavior was practiced through such elements as an open body bearing and frequent eye contact. Trainees were taught to listen for and respond accurately to others' feelings and the total meaning of their message--to the obvious message and the message behind the communicator's actual words. Attention was given to responding in a tone of voice that communicated respect and caring rather than detachment or condescension. Personal discipline or patience were also part of the exercises, because these qualities are important not only in effective listening and communication, but also for enduring the testing that a juvenile might put a volunteer through. Of the more active forms of communication, helpful confrontation and honesty were discussed and practiced. A therapeutic type of confrontation and simple honesty, based on inner strength, is vital to the helpers of juvenile offenders so that the helpers can deal straightforwardly with manipulative and erasive behavior without driving the juvenile away.

In addition to their in-workshop activities, trainees were encouraged to put skills into practice during their everyday contacts. They were also encouraged to keep a diary or log of some personal thoughts or insights which they had in relation to interpersonal communications and relationships. Their homework practice and diary entries served as a basis for large group discussions about interpersonal communications. These discussions of personal behavior and thoughts were not only interesting, but they also provided a way for participants to personalize the skills they were learning and to reflect on and move toward some of the basic attitudes and perceptions that support effective interpersonal communication.

The second category of workshop activities consisted of four hours of lecture-discussions and roleplaying related to important psycho-social-interactions between adult volunteers and juvenile offenders. Dr. Bazemore will discuss this part of the workshop.

Four paper and pencil instruments were used to look at some of the

effects that the workshop had on participants. Seventeen of the 22 participants completed all forms. The first of these were parallel forms of a Discrimination Index administered at the beginning and end of the workshop. The Discrimination Index measures how trainee's judgements about the value of communication responses compares with an "expert's" judgement of such responses. The lower the score on a Discrimination Index the better. The average preworkshop score was 1.2, a very high, that is, poor score. The average postworkshop score was .76, still higher than desirable but significantly less than the preworkshop average ($t=5.69$, $df=16$, $p < .001$). This difference indicates that trainees improved significantly in their ability to recognize effective interpersonal communication skills.

A second form of evaluation was done with parallel forms of a Communication Index administered at the beginning and end of the workshop. This index is designed to measure the ability of trainees to respond effectively to a problem statement during the early phase of an interpersonal helping relationship. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating a poor response and 5 an extremely good response, the preworkshop mean score was 1.5, a poor score. The postworkshop mean was 2.0, still lower than desirable but significantly better than the preworkshop scores. The difference indicates that on the average trainees improved in their ability to make understanding or empathic responses.

A third instrument measuring authoritarianism showed no significant mean differences between pre and post workshop scores. The average score of about 96 was in the very middle of the range of possible scores on the authoritarianism instrument, suggesting that the participants could be considered moderately openminded people.

A final instrument, a Participants Evaluation Form was administered to 21 trainees at the final workshop meeting. The purpose of this 18 item instrument was to assess the participant's overall subjective evaluation of the communication training phase of the workshop. Results from this form were highly positive. They indicated that the participants thought that the workshop pursued clear and important objectives in an organized manner and helped them to develop listening and communication skills that they could use in their volunteer counseling. When asked to give an overall grade to the workshop, nine gave an A+, eight an A,

2 an A-, and 1 a B+. Open-ended responses were also quite praising of the workshop.

For those who are interested, a more detailed report of the evaluation procedures and results is available.

Mr. William Brockman's presentation will include some observations made during an informal follow-up meeting with the Volunteers in December 1974. A more formal follow-up with the Discrimination and Communication Index is planned for May 1975.

The nature of the training provided by this workshop has important implications for the trainees beyond their participation in the volunteer counseling program. During the workshop, trainees were frequently encouraged to put skills into practice in their everyday lives. Many did this and reported on positive changes that were occuring in important relationships in their lives.

The workshop presents strong evidence that ordinary citizens of good will--men and women, blacks and whites, of all ages--can be involved in extensive and effective training for volunteer counseling. This evidence is important because of the increasing need and use of volunteer counselors in a variety of human service agencies.

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